
[“Transgenics are not welcome”. Interview with André HI Dallagnol of the Brazilian NGO Terra de Direitos \(Land of Rights\)](#)

FuturaGene, a subsidiary of Suzano Papel e Celulose, one of Brazil's largest pulp and paper producers, has requested to the country's National Technical Commission on Biosafety (CTNBio) authorization to commercially plant a type of genetically modified eucalyptus tree named “Event H421.” But on March 5, the date of the CTNBio meeting to discuss FuturaGene's request, close to one thousand women from the Landless Rural Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra - MST) took over FuturaGene's facilities in the city of São Paulo where the transgenic eucalyptus variant is being tested. At the same time, 300 members of the international peasant organization Via Campesina disrupted the CTNBio meeting in Brasília. The meeting was rescheduled for April 9 and no decision was made on the transgenic eucalyptus.

As someone who was present at the CTNBio meeting during the actions, could you tell us how was that moment of resistance?

In my view, it was a historic moment. Representatives of civil society were finally able to tell the scientists and present corporations that transgenics are not welcome, and that the purely technical discourse will not be tolerated any longer as it does not take into account these technologies' social and economic impacts on society, like the effects of transgenic eucalyptus on bee-keeping.

Why do you think Brazilian peasant movements place such emphasis on the need to prevent the release of transgenic eucalyptus?

I think it is a natural reaction to the constant stream of approvals for commercial release of genetically modified organisms using criteria that do not adequately reflect the risks associated with the technology. To give you an idea, earlier on the same day two GM varieties of maize and soya tolerant to 2,4-D (an ingredient in the chemical weapon Agent Orange) and another “stacked” transgenic, combining two different genetic alterations in the same seed, were approved.

Eucalyptus is an exotic (non-native) species in Brazil and is frowned on by peasant farmers and traditional peoples and communities. Even non GM varieties of eucalyptus take an environmental toll, especially due to their high water consumption which can dehydrate the soil. (There are cases of entire communities being surrounded with intensive monocultures of eucalyptus, described as “green deserts,” where water resources have been completely depleted). Fast-growing transgenic eucalyptus is even worse in this respect. Aerial spraying of toxic agrochemicals is used intensively on large-scale plantations, again affecting nearby communities.

What arguments does FuturaGene (Suzano) put forward in favour of the commercial release of transgenic trees? Why do you think FuturaGene is making its application in Brazil?

Their major argument is that the transgenic variety grows faster than non transgenic eucalyptus; the time between planting and harvesting is reduced by 20%, theoretically giving more productivity per unit area. This is a purely economic argument.

Other people argue that the new variety is more “ecologically sound”, but this is a fallacy. In the first years of growth, the trees consume most water. So in practice, for the last two years before they are harvested, the eucalyptus trees may act as ground cover while the land essentially lies fallow.

GM technology is experimental and there is no certainty about its safety. And, as it happened with the approval of the first transgenic mosquito, a trend to find countries with less rigid safety standards is perceived.

Due to legal loopholes in the national Biosafety Law and the blind eye turned by the majority of scientists who sit on CTNBio, Brazil is an excellent prospective guinea pig for commercial releases on that level.

Would CTNBio be breaking any Brazilian laws or international agreements if it approved FuturaGene’s application?

Brazilian law has important loopholes for commercial approvals; such as the social and economic impact assessments that are only presented to a sort of “second tier” of CTNBio, the National Biosafety Council (CNBS), which has only met twice since CTNBio was created in 2005. This makes possible the commercial approval without any social and environmental impact assessments. Moreover, under national legislation, CTNBio ended up taking the power of environmental authorities related to absolving environmental impact assessments that used to be reserved to the.

Furthermore, the studies are always conducted by the companies involved. Independent studies are invariably disregarded by most of the scientists on CTNBio.

At present there is a partial international moratorium on releasing transgenic tree varieties. I say “partial” moratorium because it makes approval of commercial release conditional on conducting studies - already completed - even when these studies are done by the same companies who are interested in planting the GM trees, and lack data about the risks to human and animal health and to the environment, as well as social and economic impact analysis.

Are there legal means to oppose this? Is it possible within the Brazilian justice system to stop the commercial release of GM trees?

We think it is possible to have recourse to the justice system to try to stop commercial release of GM eucalyptus; however, judges are extremely cautious when scientific matters are involved. They don’t feel qualified to “interfere” with scientific decisions, and they are often unaware of the fact that science is not impartial but is allied to economic interests, as in this case.

Fighting GM trees through legal avenues has to be done by the book, by disputing formal aspects of the commercial release process, such as an express breach of national or international regulations.

What companies or corporate groups are lobbying CTNBio for approval of GM trees? Are you aware of any other companies that have already requested CTNBio’s approval for commercial release of transgenic tree varieties?

I think that this project is of interest to more than a single company like FuturaGene; in fact, if authorized the process would “open the floodgates” to a whole new generation of GM trees. But I am not aware of any other current commercial release applications.

What are the main risks if FuturaGene releases GM trees commercially in Brazil? What potential impacts are social movements concerned about?

Apart from setting a global historical precedent for approval of transgenic trees, a major problem is that research indicates the potential for genetic contamination of other (non GM) eucalyptus trees, and more alarmingly yet, of honey production.

Eucalyptus trees are one of the main pollen sources for bees and so have an important role in honey production. There are no conclusive studies about the possible harmful effects on the health of bees or of consumers exposed to honey containing transgenic eucalyptus pollen.

Native (non GM) varieties of eucalyptus are known to impoverish the soil, deplete water resources and drive away local wildlife. Further potential impacts are associated with their high water consumption, while there is an unprecedented ongoing water crisis in several Brazilian cities. There are also hazards associated with intensive use of toxic agrochemicals on eucalyptus plantations.

What are your expectations for the next CNTBio meeting, scheduled for April 9?

It is too early to say. What we know is that security will be stepped up and social participation will be more restricted than it was at the last meeting.

Social movements succeeded in getting the message across that they will not tolerate GM trees, and it is possible that they will invoke legal mechanisms to prevent the approval of commercial release.

André HI Dallagnol andrehd@terraedireitos.org.br
Legal Adviser, Terra de Direitos, Brasil